

SUEC

Marine Corps officials gather to strengthen its backbone -- the small unit

By Lance Cpl. Sha'ahn Williams

Combat Correspondent

“It’s the man on the ground who makes the difference. It’s the young man on the ground that has to be the best trained and the best educated. If we can’t change things for the better, we’re doing something wrong.”

Those were the words of retired Gen. Alfred M. Gray, 29th commandant of the Marine Corps and keynote speaker at the Small Unit Excellence Conference held May 25-26 in the research center here bearing his name.

The Marine Corps Combat Development Command, supported by the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, hosted the conference to generate ideas and recommendations that will improve infantry small unit training, solve equipment issues and enhance noncommissioned officer selection and education.

Lt. Gen. James Mattis, commanding general, MCCDC, moderated the two-day event, for an audience that included Gen. Michael W. Hagee, commandant of the Marine Corps, and Sgt. Maj. John L. Estrada, sergeant major of the Marine Corps.

The SUEC set the stage for infantry noncommissioned and staff noncommissioned officers to be heard by the Corps’ major decision makers about small unit needs.

The conference began with administrative remarks from retired Col. Robert K. Dobson, military analyst for the Expeditionary Force Development Center here.

“Our goal is to have a rich interchange,” he said. “We want to pull from the Marines’ experience to learn what we need to improve for small combat units,” said Dobson.

According to Gray, the Marine Corps has always provided good training, but from time to time it needs to be revamped.

“We’ve made adjustments along the lines to improve training,” Gray said. “We fought hard to get two weeks added to recruit training -- we added the Crucible.

“Basically anyone who comes into our corps of Marines will be familiar in basic infantry tactics.”

Gray suggested that education would make small units more successful.

“We need to challenge Marines more, mentally,” Gray said. “They like to do the physical things, it’s a part of our culture, but you’ve got to get the brainpower turned on.”

Most of the speakers at the conference mentioned that better weapons and weapons training would make a big difference in the success small units have in combat.

One of the most important topics was the weight of the infantry Marine’s combat load.

“We need to be light enough to get there, and heavy enough to win,” Gray said.

After Gray spoke, the commandant was the next speaker to take the floor.

Hagee told listeners he wanted to see more funding for research into reducing the load infantrymen carry on a daily basis. He assured them the Marine Corps was working closely with Congress on getting money for research to properly equip and train Marines for the battle in Iraq.

“We are committed to getting the funds we need,” Hagee said. “I believe that Congress and the American people will support us if we stand up and ask.”

Hagee also talked about the war in Iraq and the enemy the infantry faces.

“We’re going to continue to go against a thinking enemy, today,” he said. “For example, as we change our approach to improvised explosive devices, the Iraqis change within seven to 10 days.

“We are fighting more platoon to platoon. Though they will lose, they are more than willing to take us on.”

Hagee went on to speak about his views on modern warfare, and why the SUEC conference was needed.

“We don’t have a peer competitor on sea, in space, or 15,000 feet above sea level. Our challenges are on land, in jungles and in cities. We want to fight an away game, but the disadvantage is the enemy knows the terrain. The enemy has an inexhaustible amount of men and we need to realize that they are just as dedicated to their mission as we are.

The enemy is looking for gaps and seams to penetrate and so are we. We are looking to destroy his will to fight. The individual Marine is the most important weapons system we have, without a doubt,” Hagee said.

According to Hagee, the Battle of Fallujah is a significant example of what Marines are going to face in the future and a good example of how they are going to fight.

“It’s about the individual Marine with small arms going house to house in that environment,” he said

The commandant concluded by saying he was interested in hearing suggestions on how to better prepare men and women to do the dangerous, but important, job of accomplishing the mission on today’s battlefield.

After the commandant's speech, a panel of six Marines who have recently returned from Iraq took their seats onstage to address the audience about small unit issues from their points of view.

The Marines were leaders from different echelons of command, from platoon leader to division commanding officer, to give the audience different opinions from the various positions in a small unit. Each panelist spoke for five to 10 minutes before the floor was opened to the audience for questions.

"Small unit leadership is the backbone; that's why we need to focus on it," said Staff Sgt. Shelby Lasater, platoon sergeant, 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division.

"Training in a combat environment needs to be constant to avoid complacency," he said.

"Complacency kills. Training keeps you in the constant mindset of a warrior."

Lasater expressed the need for proper weapons training and the need for all infantry military occupational specialties to be cross-trained.

Another panelist talked about the many tasks of a squad leader and the difficulties a heavy combat load presented.

"The loads have at least two kits," said 1st Lt. Nathan P. Ruge, platoon commander, 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division. "Soccer balls, candy, dolls (for humanitarian and community relations efforts), plus the combat load slows us down," he said. "We can not catch the Iraqis who take potshots at us and run."

Other problems Marines face occurred due to lack of training.

"Great advancements have been made in procurement of equipment, but Marines haven't been able to be trained on some of it," said Chief Warrant Officer 4 Charles F. Colleton, division gunner, 1st Marine Division. "Sometimes Marines are seeing a weapon for the

first time in combat. We need to get equipment to the schoolhouses, to avoid some problems that occur in theater that Marines didn't know how to fix, which could have been prevented in training," he said.

"The Indoor Simulated Marksmanship Training is good, but Marines need to put the weapon in their shoulder and lock and fire. They need to hear the weapon firing next to them."

All the Marines on the panel agreed that constant training was necessary and there is a need for more experienced squad leaders.

"Most of the squad leaders were lance corporals and corporals, and we're not taking anything away from them, but the knowledge and experience from training in the past and coming up through the ranks gives older Marines more confidence to articulate what's needed for the job," said Lasater.

"Marines who have previous experience are more proficient, patient and disciplined because of what they've been through," he said.

Once the panel discussion was over, there was a brief break for lunch before everyone reconvened for another panel discussion about joint and coalition observations.

Officers from Australia, Britain, and the United States Army and Navy spoke about similarities and differences between the Marine Corps and the services they represented.

The conference taught those who attended that small units need more funding for training, lighter and more effective equipment, and extensive weapons training before going into combat. There is also a need to look at the current promotion system in the infantry occupation to encourage experienced staff NCOs to stay on the front lines and train younger marines.

The SUEC provided an opportunity to assess the Marine Corps' ground forces in today's fight. It was also a forum for insight on how to best adjust for tomorrow's objectives.

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Gen. Michael W. Hagee, commandant of the Marine Corps, addresses the audience at the Small Unit Excellence Conference May 25 and 26 at the Gen. Alfred M. Gray Research Center here. The Marine Corps Combat Development Command, supported by the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, hosted the conference to generate ideas and recommendations that will improve infantry small unit training, solve equipment issues and enhance noncommissioned officer selection and education.